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The 'Come and Go' Syndrome of Teachers in Remote Indigenous Schools: Listening to the Perspective of Indigenous Teachers about What Helps Teachers to Stay and What Makes Them Go

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High turnover of teachers in remote Indigenous community schools in the Northern Territory has long been considered a significant contributing factor to low academic outcomes for students in those communities. The average length of stay for a non-Indigenous teacher in a remote school can more easily be measured in months than years. This instability in staffing is largely responsible for the instability experienced by many students in these schools. This 'Come and Go' syndrome holds true for non-Indigenous staff; however, the opposite can often be said of Indigenous staff. Indigenous staff in these schools tend to be the 'Stay and Stay and Stay' teachers. They have often worked in their local community school for decades and have seen literally hundreds of non-Indigenous teachers 'Come and Go'. They have been the ones to provide a semblance of stability and some level of program sustainability in education for the children of their own communities. While there is some qualitative data on the things that improve retention of non-Indigenous teachers in rural and remote schools, it mostly looks at the training and skills development that can be applied to the situation. No one has really ever asked Indigenous teachers for their observations or opinions about what makes teachers stay and what makes them go. This article will draw on conversations from two focus groups of Indigenous teachers from remote schools in Central Australia who were invited to discuss just this question.

■ **Keywords::** Indigenous, teacher, remote, turnover

Some Background: Evidence About How Teachers and Teaching Impact on Student Learning

In 2006, the *Evaluating Literacy Approaches Project* released a report (Abu-Duhou, McKenna, & Howley, 2006) that revealed data about teachers working in Northern Territory schools. It looked at teacher quality, experience and expertise, particularly in relation to the students most at risk — those in very remote communities. The data revealed trends in three main areas: (1) high teacher mobility and low retention rates; (2) lack of experience, particularly in terms of teaching Indigenous students; and (3) lack of specialist skills and training, particularly ESL. Given the strong links, explored below, between teacher quality and students' experience of school, this sounds alarm bells for the impact these trends are having on student achievement and school success in remote Northern Territory Schools.

In an extensive review of research conducted by John Hattie and the University of Auckland (2003) into the factors that make a difference in student achievement, it was discovered that next to the student themselves, the biggest variant in student achievement is the quality of the teacher. Hattie suggests that up to about 30% of student achievement can be attributed to what the teacher does or does not do (Hattie, 2003, p. 2). In contrast to all the 'interventions at the structural, home, policy or school level', which Hattie suggests has little influence over the achievement of

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students, he attests that 'excellence in teaching is the single most powerful influence on achievement' (2003, p. 4). So what does this mean for our most marginalised students?

Students are marginalised for different reasons — language, disability, gender, behaviour — but their marginalisation often leads to similar results; specifically, low or non-achievement in educational outcomes and alienation from the schooling system. Johnston and Hayes (2008) attribute this to teachers setting differentiated expectations of student achievement, suggesting that: 'teachers interpret the moral and academic behaviour of their students and provide them with different educational opportunities' (p. 121). This process of singling out groups of students and developing lower expectations for them cannot help but produce a lower academic standard and a negative experience of school for those students. A number of studies have addressed the importance of teachers' expectations in relation to high academic performance (Darling-Hammond & Schon, 1996; Edwards-Groves & Murray, 2008; Hammond, 2008; Mehan, 1992). Previous research in this area seems to indicate two main teacher-oriented reasons for this marginalisation of students. First, some teachers seem ill prepared by their teacher training to handle the demands of teaching in challenging contexts that are outside their own experience. This context often sees them teaching students who do not fit into the mainstream idea of what a student should be. Second, and perhaps as a consequence of this lack of training, teachers develop attitudes or 'social constructions' towards these groups of students that often then stand in the way of effective student learning.

In the Australian context, when dealing with schools located in rural and remote areas, who often serve a clientele of Indigenous language speaking, low-achieving students, a number of studies have looked at what helps and hinders teacher and student success (Bush Tracks Research Collective, 2005; Jarzabkowski, 2003; Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell, & Millwater, 1999). Some previous studies have chosen to focus on the inadequacies of teacher preparation as one of the causes for both teacher and student failure in challenging contexts. Looking at the Australian context of rural and remote schools, Yarrow et al. (1999, p. 2) target the 'lack of effective preparation of teachers to teach in rural schools'. This study suggests that:

> *Despite a large body of research that identified the need for specialised pre-service preparation which accommodates the social and professional differences associated with work in these contexts . . . the implementation of such programs by teacher training institutions has been sparse, lacking in cohesion and in many cases non-existent, (Yarrow et al., 1999, p. 2)*

These findings are not just limited to the Australian context. Yarrow et al. (1999) also refer to studies in the United States and Canada that show similar needs in the training, recruitment and retention of teachers in rural and remote contexts, and similar levels of inaction on the part of teacher training institutions to meet these needs (Barker & Beckner, 1987; Luft, 1992; Stone, 1990). The authors of this article go on to suggest ways of overcoming these challenges. They identify a number of areas that would improve recruitment and retention of teachers in rural and remote locations, including: more effective partnerships between universities, departments of education and community members and organisations; the development of internships and mentoring programs; and the specific targeting of members of the rural and remote communities to undertake the training as they are 'more likely to take up and remain in rural and remote teaching positions' (Yarrow et al., 1999, p. 11).

Jarzabkowski (2003), in a study of teachers in the remote Australian teaching context, also highlights the importance of 'teacher attitude' and the 'maturity and experience' of teachers as key factors in successful teaching in a remote school. Jarzabkowski calls on 'teacher educators, education departments and school leaders' to ensure that their programs help student teachers or new graduates come to an appreciation of the importance of 'positive attitudes' towards rural and remote schools and 'collaborative working practices' (2003, p. 144). Jarzabkowski's study also focuses on some of the in-service factors that support teachers to survive and thrive in this type of school. She focuses on the importance of collegiality, stating that: 'collegiality appears to become much more significant in a geographically isolated environment. It appears to provide the basis for the resilience necessary for teachers to work in such a setting' (Jarzabkowski, 2003, p. 143).

The Bush Tracks Research Collective (2005) was established to look at teachers in rural contexts, particularly those experiencing the transition between pre-service and in-service. Some early observations indicate that teachers in rural and remote contexts tend to revert to 'comfort pedagogies' (2005, p. 4) as a way of dealing with a challenging teaching environment. Graduate teachers are more likely to teach as they were taught rather than putting into practice pedagogies that are appropriate to their new teaching context. The Bush Tracks project also note the high turnover of staff leading to young teachers being promoted to leadership positions before they have developed adequate experience and thus denying them the chance to gradually develop their career pathway (2005, p. 4).

Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung (2007) have also chosen to look at the in-service factors that both impede teaching and learning, but also strategies that support changes in teacher practice. Their article links together studies, from a range of countries, that relate specifically to 'socially and academically marginalised' (Timperley et al., 2007, p. 177) student groups found within schools — gender, low socio-economic, Indigenous, disability, and with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). The authors suggest that the impediment for these students are often associated with the teachers perceptions of them

and that 'improved outcomes for students were associated with teachers thinking differently about the students they taught' (Timperley et al., 2007, p. 160); specifically, 'how teachers thought about their students in terms of social positioning, their inclusion in the full range of classroom activities, and their own expectations of student achievement' (Timperley et al., 2007, p. 164). The authors call this reframing teachers' social construction of students. Not all of the studies examined by Timperley et al. produced successful results in terms of improving student outcomes, but there was sufficient evidence from at least eight studies worldwide to suggest that addressing teachers' social construction of students does make a difference to student outcomes. Some of these in-service interventions that seemed to find success shared characteristics, namely: the use of external experts combined with multiple opportunities for teachers to learn and put learning into practice; involvement of school leadership — particularly leaders who are prepared to challenge the status quo; a shift in teacher discourse about the students; collaborative learning over an extended period of time; and a focus on explicit learning goals (Timperley et al., 2007, pp. 164–173). The authors also talk about the importance of creating dissonance with the current position, while recognising the risks that this poses if 'teachers are taken too far outside their comfort zone' (Timperley et al., 2007, p. 177). In the most successful programs the following held true:

> *Teacher engagement and understanding was expected at both a theoretical and practical level. No intervention offered teachers 'handy hints' to implement as they wished. Instead, a deep theoretical understanding was demanded and teachers were given opportunities to translate this theory into classroom practice. (Timperley et al., 2007, p. 178)*

The authors conclude that 'mere training is insufficient to produce meaningful change in schools . . . particularly when an issue as complex as teachers' social construction of students is to be addressed' (Timperley et al., 2007, p. 179).

Hickling-Hudson and Ahlquist (2003) attribute much of Indigenous children's lack of success at school to a combination of inappropriate curriculum and lack of preparedness in teachers. In a comparative study of Indigenous students in Australia and North America they suggest that the Eurocentrism offered to many Indigenous children is not officially recognised and does not meet their educational needs, yet it is an important factor explaining their relative lack of success in the education system. Specifically, they suggest that the problem lies in the fact that, 'the ways in which the Eurocentric curriculum, which includes the practices and assumptions of whiteness, is often accepted as the norm that it is invisible and beyond question for many teachers' (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003, p. 67). This then has a flow-on effect to teachers because of demographical factors. For example: 'In Australia and the United States, Indigenous peoples are in such a minority (around 2 per cent or less in both countries) that it is likely that non-Indigenous teachers will be numerically dominant in the teaching service for the foreseeable future' (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003, p. 66). In the remote Australian context, the authors observed situations where the 'Anglo-centric curriculum . . . was being provided in a community that was totally Aboriginal. There was an evident mismatch between the teacher's culture and that of the community' (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003, p. 73). This is largely because their universities had given them little or no preparation to teach anything other than the Anglo-Centric curriculum that they had received in their own learning and teaching programs. Furthermore, they had very little in-service support from the State Department of Education, and certainly none that would have helped them to reorient their teaching to take into account the cultural context (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003, p. 73).

In the American context, the authors found similar evidence of mismatch between students' teachers and teaching. For example, in one Year 4 classroom, the children (nearly all Mexican American and Native American) were all quietly copying a list of words and meanings from the board. The children were silenced except when the non-Indigenous teacher asked for a show of hands. This teacher had been teaching for over two decades and said believed in strict discipline, traditional grammar, basal readers, and a firm structure within which the children could work. She deplored the low standards of literacy and numeracy of her students but was quick to blame the parents for not making the children ready for school, saying that they provided neither books at home nor help with homework. The work set for the students was test-driven and boring, if not stupefying (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003, p. 75). In the North American research the authors also found examples of the opposite scenario. In one classroom there was a teacher who was a woman of colour with a high degree of consciousness of multicultural education. She had been trained in California, a state that mandates a culturally and linguistically diverse emphasis in credential course work. She was committed to teach children about how to affirm, not deny, their richly diverse skin colours and ethnicities. In this classroom, students' identities were being acknowledged, and their cultures and languages were being validated (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003, pp. 75–76).

Clearly the teacher has a significant impact on student success — their choices about what to teach and how to teach it often impact upon how and how much and how successfully a child learns. How do we support marginalised students to feel that school is a place where they belong and where they can experience success? Almost all current thinking suggests that one of the keys is a focus on 'quality teaching' (Amosa, Ladwig, Griffiths, & Gore, 2007; Harpaz & Lefstein, 2000; Hattie, 2003;

Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Lowenberg-Ball & Forzani, 2009; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). So how do we find and keep these 'quality' teachers, especially for the classrooms where they are most needed? And how do we recognise quality in a teaching context that is different to the mainstream? Gopinathan (2006, p. 264) reminds us that socially held views about knowledge and learning, all of which are culturally embedded, influence teaching and learning approaches and that certain culturally based variables can be powerful drivers for effective learning. To achieve quality teaching and ensure that education is the transformative vehicle it is capable of being, Gopinathan suggests that teachers must be able to recognise, understand and act upon the 'local' (2006, p. 266). It is interesting to see how much of this idea is reflected in the responses of research participants below.

Research with Indigenous Participants and Methodological Choices

This research originally sat in the context of another study (Fovet & Hall, 2012) that drew comparisons between the high turnover of staff in challenging contexts, specifically remote Indigenous schools and schools with a focus on students with SEBD. However, in the Northern Territory remote Indigenous schooling context, the high turnover of teachers that has been so disruptive to the learning of Indigenous students is not a blanket condition that can be attributed to all teachers. There are some non-Indigenous teachers who actually stay longer periods of time. More importantly, there are Indigenous teachers, recruited from the local community, who have done their full teacher training, and who have been working in the described context for up to 30 years in one capacity or another. Many of them began working at their respective schools as 'literacy workers' or 'assistant teachers' (Hall et al., 2009). These teachers have witnessed first hand the turnover of staff and management in their schools and have been in a unique position, as education professionals, to observe and analyse the types of non-Indigenous/non-local teachers who are successful or not in this context.

Broadening the research focus to include research with Indigenous teachers posed methodological challenges for a non-Indigenous researcher. Conscious of the postcolonial discourse regarding the detrimental impact of 'research' being 'done to' Indigenous peoples across the world and the fact that 'research' is probably 'one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary' (Smith, 1999, p. 1), appropriate choice of methodology needed to be considered (Fredericks, 2007; Jordan, Stocek, Mark, & Matches, 2009; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2001). The research needed to be respectful of the worldviews, cultures, languages and knowledges of the Indigenous participants, but also conscious of how to 'do research' mindful of all of these things including:

> *What a non-Indigenous researcher needs to be aware of when researching with Indigenous peoples; how non-Indigenous researchers can improve their practices with Indigenous peoples; and, most fundamentally, whether it is appropriate for non-Indigenous researchers to be involved in research with Indigenous peoples. (Wilson, 2001, p. 214)*

Linda Tuhiwai Smith's, *Decolonising methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* (1999), is particularly instructive. She reminds researchers that they must behave in a way that reflects Indigenous values and does not cause hurt, offence or damage to the Indigenous participants in the research. In particular, she sets out a series of Maori principles (1999, p. 120), namely:

- *A respect for people*
- *Present yourself to people face to face*
- *Look, listen . . . speak*
- *Share and host people, be generous*
- *Be cautious*
- *Don't flaunt your knowledge.*

Smith also comments (1999, p. 173) that in a cross-cultural context, the questions that need to be asked are ones such as:

1. *Who defined the research problem?*
2. *For whom is the study worthy and relevant? Who says so?*
3. *What knowledge will the community gain from this study?*
4. *What knowledge will the researcher gain from this study?*
5. *What are some likely positive outcomes for this study?*
6. *What are some possible negative outcomes?*
7. *How can the negative outcomes be eliminated?*
8. *To whom is the researcher accountable?*
9. *What processes are in place to support the research, the researched and the researcher?*

While the first list of behaviours were observed during the collection of data, there are significant gaps with regard to answering all of the nine questions Smith poses. For example, while there were potentially very positive outcomes for the Indigenous schools as a result of this study, those Indigenous teachers involved in the study were not directly involved in defining the research problem itself. The accountability identified in question eight exists in this particular case only through the author's personal relationship with each of the teachers involved.

Smith comments that 'research methodology is based on the skill of matching the problem with an "appropriate" set of investigative strategies. It is concerned with ensuring that information is accessed in such a way as to guarantee validity and reliability' (Smith 1999, p. 173). It

was evident that the previously developed semi-directive questionnaire used with non-Indigenous teachers and administrators (Fovet & Hall, 2012) was not the most appropriate tool to use and instead it was decided to conduct some focus group conversations with small groups of Indigenous teachers working in remote Indigenous schools in Central Australia. This qualitative methodology was selected largely based on the fact that it most closely resembled a type of story telling activity and that story telling was a more appropriate and comfortable way of sharing information for Indigenous people (Fredericks, 2007; Jordan et al., 2009; Smith, 1999). Fredericks (2007, p. 19) talks about 'telling' as being 'not only about what is said, but about how we speak, and how we listen'. Additionally, she comments that in a research context using story telling creates a 'more egalitarian concept of power'. Focus groups involving story telling have also been used successfully in research and evaluation in the Cree Nations of Quebec (Jordan et al., 2009, p. 75). Building on this idea of using story telling through focus groups the following factors were considered for research with Indigenous teachers:

- All teachers identified for the purpose of the research speak their own Indigenous language as their primary language. All of them speak English as either a second, third or fourth language.
- All of them come from a language and cultural background that has oracy as it's primary means of communication.
- All teachers who were asked to be involved felt more confident sharing ideas and information orally rather than in written form.
- Conducting small focus groups enabled the research to be conducted more as a conversation rather than a series of questions and answers.
- All participants in focus groups already knew each other well.

To maintain reliability and validity, a similar group of questions were constructed to the ones posed in the semi-directive questionnaire given to administrators. It was assumed that this group of Indigenous teachers would have the same sense of wide-angle lens as a manager or administrator who had managed teachers in this context over a number of years. However, while the lists of questions were available to the group throughout the discussion, the conversation was free to move where the participants wanted to take it.

Reflections on the Qualitative Methodology Chosen

Two separate focus groups were conducted on separate days. All participants had worked in Central Australian school for between 10 and 30 years in various capacities. All participants happened to be women, which is largely reflective of the gender representation of Indigenous staff in remote schools. All participants were completing their own study and research work at the time the conversations were conducted. This meant that this research was conducted in an environment where some broader conversations about teaching and learning were already occurring. It was also conducted during a period when each of the teachers were conducting their own Action Research project in their respective schools. By participating in this research, they were also gaining a better understanding about the process of 'doing research' themselves and it was modelling some methodological approaches that they in turn utilised in their own research.

In the first focus group there were four Indigenous participants. They came from different first language backgrounds (Turpin 2005) with two being Luritja speakers, one being a Western Arrarnta speaker and one being a Pitjatjantjara speaker. For over two thirds of the conversation English was the chosen language. This was never part of the instructions but was chosen as the language common to all participants. However, throughout the conversation a great deal of code switching was observed. This was largely led by one of the Luritja speakers who is also fluent in both the other Indigenous languages represented in the group. All participants had known each other professionally for many years and some had worked together. Two of the participants were also cousins. The participants were also very familiar with the researcher. This allowed for a sense of familiarity and confidence within the group. It was also clearly explained that they should speak freely as the contents of the conversation would remain anonymous. Three out of the four participants spoke very freely and contributed a great deal to the discussion. One of the four listened attentively to the whole discussion, but was more selective in her contributions. The use of the focus group format was highly effective and even though the focus questions were written on a large sheet of paper for all to see and we did follow these in a loose way, the format enabled the conversations to take their own journey as negotiated between the participants, and also allowed for some of the responses and discussion to occur in first language rather than just in English.

In the second focus group there were only two Indigenous participants. They were both Warlpiri speakers and there was a definite pattern to the responses and conversation. The group was heavily dominated by one participant, who is the more confident English speaker of the two. This dominant participant largely directed the path of the discussion and the second participant often simply agreed with what was being discussed or offered simple, shorter comments on topics she felt most strongly about. Often her comments were preceded by an interaction in Warlpiri between the two participants. It should be noted that these two women have grown up together and have a natural dynamic between them born out of this lifelong relationship. This second focus group did not follow the structure

of the questions nearly as closely as the first group did. At times it was necessary to insert comments to nudge the conversation more closely towards the area of the original questions. Despite the different paths that the conversations took, remarkably similar themes emerged through the two conversations.

Data Analysis

Both Indigenous focus group discussions were recorded using *Audacity*, on a laptop computer. Each recording was then transcribed with names and specific references removed for privacy and confidentiality reasons. Based on the transcripts, a manual coding system was used to extrapolate themes indicated by the participants. The number of times a particular theme or idea was raised was used to indicate that the participants regarded this as a key factor in the 'Come and Go' phenomenon in remote schools. The first focus group discussion was chosen to develop the coding system as this was a longer discussion involving a wider group of participants from a range of teaching locations. The result of this initial coding was the development of 16 themes related to why non-Indigenous teachers experience success or not when teaching in a remote teaching context. Upon review, a couple of these themes were combined, resulting in a final list from discussion 1 of 14 themes. Once the codes were established with this first group, the second focus group discussion was analysed, based on these codes. Strong correlation was found with many of the initial themes found in discussion 1; however, four additional themes were found.

Themes from the Indigenous Focus Groups

The results of the coding were striking in the similarity between the two groups.

Certain themes emerged strongly as factors in helping non-Indigenous teachers experience success or work well in a remote Indigenous teaching context. The most often-mentioned factor was an ability to support Indigenous staff and adopt a team teaching approach:

> *Like we might learn from another teacher a different way of teaching, and other teachers might come with different teaching skills.*

> *Some teachers stay because maybe their team teacher is very good and they work very well and they share team teaching and share other things.*

Another important factor, according to the Indigenous teachers involved in the research, was supporting a strong program and embarking on quality teaching practices:

> *I think the teacher is patient with the kids and kids are learning things slowly and carefully and are using the right words, language . . . and always encouraging kids.*

> *We used to sit down all together and like plan for our levels, like for early Childhood [name] would do that, [name of non-Indigenous teacher] would start her off and she'd have good ideas to run with. Then for Primary, me, she'd sit me down and start me off, and for Middle years she would work with the YAPA staff, maybe a TA/AT.*

The third in this group of themes suggesting what helps non-Indigenous teachers be successful in this context was an ability to work well cross-culturally:

> *Remembering that when they come to a community we [Indigenous staff] have to be valued and share the knowledge so that relationships can build.*

> *And like [name] . . . 3 years now, that [skin name] . . . She's really good, she helps me and helps the kids to learn, and she wanted kids to learn and she was teaching kids to you know, join in with me to teach Warlpiri and it was really good and she learned language too and learned how kids . . . [says something in language] . . . I think she's a really good teacher.*

> *I think that when they first come to our community they have to respect our lore/law, respect our behaviours. Like if you want to come and teach you have to, if you come you have to remember that you are here for teaching only, not to become bossy or to take over everything. You are here to be working with Indigenous staff.*

In both discussions issues of power and control versus empowerment were mentioned. Non-Indigenous teachers who came into the context and used power and control to make changes and manipulate situations were generally considered unsuitable to the teaching context. Those teachers and principals who came to the context and saw their role as one of supporting Indigenous staff through empowering them were deemed to be more suitable to the context:

> *There was this couple, Principal and wife . . . what he said to us was 'I came here not to make friends', which made us little bit sad. We were thinking 'what's he gonna do?' Now when he first came he started making rules 'don't do this, don't do that' and we were like senior teachers, we were in ET2 positions . . . when that Principal came he changed everything . . . they changed us, moved us everywhere: 'You going to be working now in Middle years . . . you going to be working there'.*

> *She made sure that we came up with decision making rather than someone else, not making decisions on behalf of us. And I thought that was really important. Especially me as a senior teacher there, finding my position challenging, cos some of the thing that she was doing, with her being in that role without her taking it over. It was done in a more, more partnership with her and me.*

There was also significant concern about the role the Department plays in teachers staying or not staying. Some of the things mentioned here were structural problems, such

TABLE 1

Indigenous Focus Group research: Coding

Code	Theme factors influencing success or not	Focus group 1	Focus group 2	Total
1	Power & control V empowerment	IIIII (5)	IIII (4)	9
2	Work well cross culturally	IIIIIIIIIII (11)	IIIII (5)	16
3	Willing to learn/get advice	II (2)	I (1)	3
4	Supports indigenous staff/team approach	IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII (18)	IIIIII (6)	24
5	Supports strong program/quality teaching	IIIIIIIIIII (11)	IIIIIIII (8)	19
6	Acts rudely/inappropriately/culturally insensitive/bad attitude	IIII (4)	IIIII (5)	9
7	Homesickness/culture shock	I (1)		1
8	Partner/support	I (1)	I (1)	2
9	Can't cope with teaching context	IIIII (5)	I (1)	6
10	Orientation to the context/community	II (2)		2
11	Indigenous community involvement in recruitment	I (1)		1
12	Feel accepted and at home	I (1)	I (1)	2
13	Structural/Dept interference/incompetence/politics	IIIII (5)	IIIII (5)	10
14	Other motivations — avoidance of 'real job'/money	II (2)		2
15	Working with/involving community in program		III (3)	3
16	Focus on engagement and attendance		I (1)	1
17	Leadership from principal		II (2)	2
18	Structural flexibility		I (1)	1

as sudden policy or direction changes that disempowers people, departmental interference in removing some teachers and not others, and organisational politics mostly between non-Indigenous employees:

> *Sometimes when teachers stay . . . they are the bad ones.*

> *The one that the Department finds out starts getting knowledge around the community, they started bullying that teacher, cos they didn't want that interaction, cos they know that getting language and knowledge, community knowledge, learning from local people about the community . . . I've argued a lot of times for teachers, you know, who's better than the others, but I get a response like 'Oh it's ready for them to move on' and that stops students learning, because they see another person comes with another package or experience or 'I think we'll go this way', instead of following what other teacher did.*

There were also a significant number of comments made regarding non-Indigenous teachers who acted rudely, inappropriately, were culturally insensitive or racist or displayed a bad attitude:

> *And we felt they were racist . . . because they never joined us in the staff room with eating or drinking tea, joining conversation things like that, for those kinds of things, toilet, cup of tea, they used to run back to the house and come back when the bell goes. They never used our toilet in here; they went back to the toilet in their house which was really sad for us.*

Comments were also made by both groups about non-Indigenous teachers who simply couldn't cope with the teaching context and were therefore ineffective or unsuitable:

> *I don't like his screaming and, you know, yelling at kids, and he doesn't offer any help or support, and . . . you know he can't do it all and he doesn't . . . he says hello and can be nice, but I think his teaching, he probably can't cope.*

> *See, they got no knowledge before they come out to the bush school, because they don't have that experience. They only have experience when they teach in the city schools, they've got that experience, but they don't have experience to teach out in the bush. Because there's a lot of YAPA way, a lot of culture and language.*

Other themes were identified, but these were not mentioned as often, and not necessarily by both groups. A full list of codes and responses can be seen in Table 1.

Conclusion

The insights and reflections of these Indigenous teachers largely reinforce what much of the research is saying about what constitutes quality teaching and what specifically works in remote Indigenous schools. A teacher's willingness and ability to collaborate was recognised as a key quality, along with sound knowledge and good teaching practices. An ability to work cross-culturally was also highly valued, and this is unsurprising given the Indigenous context. However, it would not be unreasonable to expect that in many contexts that deal with marginalised or low-achieving students the teacher would come from a 'culture' that is somewhat different to the students or indeed the community. In this sense, it would be important

for all teachers working in such a context to explore the 'cultural' differences they might find and to work hard at understanding these cross-cultural differences. Extensive and ongoing orientation and mentoring may help support them in this. Based on the observations of these Indigenous teachers, it is when the teacher is willing to being flexible in their practice, as well coming to this unique teaching context with openness to learn from local knowledge and experience, that they in turn experience success and therefore stay longer in the teaching context. Ultimately this is what will provide the long-term continuity and social sustainability of education for students in these remote Indigenous schools.

The more challenging themes that were highlighted by these teachers were the systemic practices that seem to occur within schools and at a departmental level, particularly practices such as moving good teachers on, leaving ineffective teachers in place, and allowing racist attitudes and behaviours to go unmanaged and unchecked. These, along with a perceived 'general unsuitability', were the sorts of things that made it harder for teachers to experience success in this context. It is these sorts of practices that create instability, mistrust and conflicts within schools. If improving student achievement is the goal for remote Indigenous schools, then recruitment of teachers who demonstrate quality teaching practices that can be flexibly tailored for the specific needs of remote Indigenous students and who are also open to cross-cultural collaboration with Indigenous teachers and communities will need to be at the core of any approach. Additionally, the structural and systemic inequalities that appear to exist need to be dealt with by stronger practical adherence to policies already in place and an organisational culture shift.

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